Playing Trans Stories, Generations, and Community

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Her name is Yumae. She has existed across many games through the years, and still does now. She has been tall, athletic, and commanding, and she has also been short, bookish, and a bit of a wallflower. She has been human, elf, alien, angel, demon, spirit, and more. She has almost always been some sort of a witch, mage, sorcerer, or spellcaster—all the better to burn you with, my dear. She sometimes—though not very often or for very long—has even been a man! Through many different games and many different forms, however, Yumae has always been me. I mean by that that she has been a fluid, evolving, fragmentary expression of myself as a trans person, including parts of who I feel myself to be, parts of who I hope to be, and parts of my failures and weaknesses.

In this sense, even as Yumae and I have constantly been changing, she has been a constant in my life. Yumae is a character I have used almost like a mirror, exploring parts of myself and trying on different performances, clothes, and behaviors to see what fit. In describing Yumae and how I relate to her she almost starts to sound like a second personality or a drag persona, and I am initially very resistant to thinking about her in those terms because they might further the transphobic narrative that trans identities are fictional, inauthentic, or imagined. But here I want to embrace the messy boundaries and meanings of Yumae because they exemplify a significant point of trans characters, stories, and play––namely, that all identities and genders are very real, meaningful fictions that organize our

senses of self, community, and reality (Stryker 1999, 157). The relationship I have with Yumae is one example of the infinitely possible relationships that players, trans or not, have with their characters and with themselves (Shaw 2014, 97).

This essay will reflect on my experiences playing games and now making them as a trans person, and it necessarily draws on the personal, activist, and political as much as it does on the theoretical. My hope in writing this is that it is more than an extended exercise in self-indulgence or sentimentality (though I think there is value in these things too), and that my experiences are helpful to others in highlighting the possibilities of games and storytelling in fashioning ourselves, our communities, and our realities. I am invested in telling and playing trans stories like my own because I know I desperately needed to hear them at one point in my life to see that people like me existed and lives and futures as a trans person were possible. I hope these stories will be helpful to someone else on their own journey. I am reminded of a James Baldwin quote introduced to me by Casey McKittrick (1995, 125), who is tragically no longer with us: "while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness". Baldwin was of course speaking primarily about race and sexuality, and I do not want to flatten or erase the differences between his stories and trans experiences even as

I think there are similarities and resonances between them. Nevertheless, I hope the trans stories in this essay will show the unique light that games can shine on our lives and relationships.

I have played games for most of my life, and video games are an important part of my story. Online games like *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet 2005) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) gave me spaces where I could experiment with identity, testing different performances of gender and social connection in ways I could not in the actual world at the time in rural, conservative America. It was games that helped me find and express who I was as a trans person, before I even had that language to describe who I was. In this sense, games have always been trans for me—not by any inherent virtue of their own, but because they were a sort of adaptable, configurable mirror that helped me see and know myself better. In so many ways, from limited character options to toxic player communities to requiring expensive technology to play them, the playful mirror of games is an imperfect one (Brett 2022; McArthur & Jenson 2015; Salter & Blodgett 2017). Yet I think there is a potential for emergence, fluidity, and transformation in games that becomes unmistakably and radically trans when trans people are playing.

My early attempts at playing with both games and gender were beautiful in their own way, but also clumsy, faltering, and at times misguided. Games allowed me to play as something closer to my gender in the actual world, and the way I played that gender was often through the limited, commodified markers of a sort of high or hyper femininity: extravagant dresses, extensive makeup, and high-heeled boots and shoes, all of which were often packaged as particular appearances or "skins" you paid for through a subscription or in-game store (Macey & Hamari 2019). There is nothing wrong or lesser with any of these gendered identity markers, but at the time I personally engaged with them on a superficial, stereotypical level because I naively believed these markers were what made someone

a woman or a trans person. The tension I feel in looking back on these practices is similar to the long-established tension between feminist thought and popular culture, wherein fashion, appearances, and material objects are sold as the defining features of gender and femininity (Hollows 2000). Of course these things are not needed in order to be trans, woman, or femme, but they can still be meaningful expressions of gender in games for trans players. Playing as high femme was important to me because these identity markers were so forbidden in my everyday life outside of games. I was finding the words and expressions for what I had always instinctively felt, but these were still devoid of context, connection, or relationship among the largely cisheteronormative players I played with.

Like so many trans folks, I didn't have access to trans community or elders growing up, or even for much of my adult life. As I came to better understand myself I had an awareness that I was not the only one like me, and that there were others before me with similar experiences. And as I pursued an education I began to learn more about trans communities, histories, cultures, and activism. I read and heard the life-giving words of trailblazing activists and community leaders like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. But my direct interactions with trans community and especially with trans elders, including the opportunities to sit, learn, play, and simply be with them, remained almost nonexistent. Perhaps I am an outlier, and others reading this have had cross-generational trans relationships for much of their lives. However I suspect my experience is much more common than it should be, especially for many trans people living outside of major LGBTQ communities in big cities like New York or San Francisco. As I've gotten more involved with both LGBTQ youth programs and community activism, I've also heard of this generational disconnect from elders who feel discarded and ignored by youth and youth who long for elders who can help light the way. Technology can often be a sticking point in this disconnect, as youth gravitate toward games

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and new media forms and elders shy away because they feel inadequate, unwelcome, or uninterested in gaming communities. Yet I believe that just as games provided me and other trans folks with opportunities for trans play, games can also be a site for trans connections that reach across and defy generational divides and barriers. I believe this because I have seen it in my community and game design work, especially in a game project I will return to shortly. I have seen eyes young and old light up when people are told that their stories matter, and that someone wants to hear them and play with them.

Listening to elders' stories is important across communities because they contain insight gained through prior experience, and they can help us better understand both our similarities and our differences. This process is especially needed and life-giving in trans communities where individuals likely do not have an immediate family member who is a trans elder. Being able to see, listen to, and learn from someone who has lived as a trans person for decades helps in many ways from the practical (how to dress, express oneself, connect with resources) to the narrative and hopeful in seeing that it is possible to live fully and joyously as a trans person. Yet these connections remain so rare, and I believe Audre Lorde's work across communities of gender, race, age, and class helps identify why that is. It is perhaps unsurprising that one of the oft-forgotten parts of Lorde's work is one where she directly addresses difference in terms of age and generations. In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde points out how concepts like the "generation gap" ultimately serve repressive societies by discouraging the transfer of knowledge between old and young, with younger people viewing the elderly as ignorant and out of touch and the elders viewing the young as foolish and inexperienced. She writes,

> If the younger members of a community view the older members
> as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join

hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, 'Why?' This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread. We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen (Lorde 2007, 117).

Lorde highlights how the misrecognition of internal differences in a community, such as viewing older members as "excess," can prevent us from seeing actual similarities and differences, and crucially from sharing of stories, experiences, and knowledge. Ultimately, this creates a trap for community organizing, advocacy, and progress, leaving younger members dealing with the same problems repeatedly. Telling trans stories across generations thus provides lessons in history and experience, and it is also a practical, political act of community care. I do not mean to imply by raising this point in a journal with a focus on gender and trans experiences that trans communities have hereto not cared about our histories, pasts, or futures. Indeed, so much of our activism, scholarship, and media development is aimed at addressing exactly these things and counteracting the erasures of trans people. Rather, my interest here is to remind and encourage trans games and other media to look inward toward trans communities, and especially to share and play more stories from our diverse peoples that have not been told before.

In particular, my hope for trans games is that they will continue to play with ordinary, everyday trans stories and experiences, and thereby forge local, regional, and cross-generational community relationships that I so desperately needed when I was fumbling around with a terrible internet connection in West Michigan. So many trans stories in popular media understandably focus on the extraordinary stories of our communities— the legendary activists, the iconic celebrities, the fantastic worlds of

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otherwise in fantasy or speculative fiction. Such stories are powerful. But powerful too are simple stories and life experiences that can show us how to live, relate, play, or simply be. These are the everyday stories of trans folks who are not on the news or having documentaries made about them or winning awards. Their claim to fame is simply living and loving their family, friends, or communities. Their stories often feature activities so commonplace that they are almost banal, like using the bathroom, going to the grocery store, visiting the doctor, or attending a community event. Yet there is power in the simple and quotidian too––in being common, these stories are also relatable and useful to trans people looking for ways to exist in the world. To put it another way, not every trans person is going to become a legendary activist, celebrity, or artist entered into a hall of fame somewhere, but every trans person needs to be able to see a future for themselves in the world and to feel that their lives and stories have meaning, that they matter.

At issue here is what narrative scholars refer to as tellability, the qualities of incidents or events that make them noteworthy, surprising, or significant and thus worth spending the time and effort to tell them as a story (Norrick 2000; Ryan 2005). Usually, the stories with the most tellability are those about the most extraordinary people and occurrences, but I argue that everyday trans stories have much needed tellability as well. Stories about trans people just being, moving, and loving in a world that can be aggressively against our very existence are inherently political statements. Speaking of her own existence in an anti-Black, anti-queer, anti-woman world, Lorde (1988) captured this sentiment when she said "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Trans stories of the local and everyday are so necessary because they help us see trans people are an everyday, common part of life, in spite of transphobic people and groups who would have us erased. Trans people everywhere have stories worth telling. It is in this spirit that

I share fragments of my own story not because they are remarkable but precisely because they are un-remarkable. Yet they are what a younger me wanted, needed, and missed the most, even as I played with different selves and worlds in games.

Trans Folks Walking: A Community-Designed Game

For me and my collaborators, Madison Ford, Famous Clark, Austin Wilson, and Wes Turner, the desire to tell trans stories, and especially different, everyday trans stories, has led to a game called *Trans Folks Walking*. *Trans Folks Walking* is a first person, narrative game that we are designing as an anthology of trans stories. Each level puts players in a different space and experience as a different trans person. For example, the first level is the experience of a trans man who is a student studying in a university library for final exams, when suddenly he has to use the bathroom and has to pick between binary bathroom options. The level asks players to feel the benefits and potential dangers of both options, including how fraught, anxious, and potentially dangerous or liberatory a simple trip to the bathroom can be for a trans person. Research has shown that being able to access a bathroom that corresponds with a trans person's gender improves their health and sense of safety, but decisions about bathroom access are often deeply affected by biases and assumptions about trans people and gender (Seelman 2016; Clements & Munro 2021). *Trans Folks Walking's* bathroom level communicates this through voice and text that narrates the anxieties of the player character and some of the thoughts that they imagine others around them are having. If the player chooses to use the men's bathroom, the player character feels that that choice matches their gender but also worries that others will think he does not belong there and might threaten or attack him. Conversely, if the player chooses the women's restroom, the player character feels the internal conflict of using a bathroom

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that does not match their gender and might still lead to people rejecting him in that space if he appears too masculine. Through these narratives and assumptions, we wanted to show how even a commonplace activity like using the bathroom can mean complicated choices for trans people, and it is not as simple as just choosing the right bathroom to use. Whatever the player decides, the player character can feel trapped in a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation wherein no matter what you do you are making a statement by just being there.

In the bathroom level and beyond, we chose to design the game as a collection of different stories in hopes that that could help counteract the tendency of audiences to approach trans experiences as one universal, totalizing Trans Story that is supposedly true of all trans people everywhere. Trans narratives across media represent trans people, and indeed it is the necessity of this representation for trans lives and communities that draws me and the *Trans Folks Walking* team to make this game. Yet trans representation also almost invariably carries the weight of empathy with it in that trans stories are expected to show people, trans or not, what it means or feels like to be trans. This has happened before with other trans games, including Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012), which despite Anna's explicit intentions with the game was still often treated as an "empathy game" representative of all trans experiences (D'Anastasio 2015). Empathy games are ones that are intended to promote understanding of a particular, often marginalized experience for a general audience, usually with the intention of increasing visibility and allyship for that experience. A major problem with empathy and empathy games is that they place marginalized peoples and our stories at the service of players from normative identities and communities. What matters is their understanding and feeling, and we need to convince them to care about us and the inequalities we face. As Teddy Pozo (2018) and others have argued, this often leads to producing certain kinds of narratives that emphasize suffering and injustice, and result

in a version of empathy that objectifies or pities others. At worst, this can promote what Lisa Nakamura (2020, 47) calls "identity tourism" that allows audiences to "feel good about feeling bad," and encourages audiences to think they know or understand the totality of others' experiences through their engagement with as little as one media text. At the heart of these issues is the question of who a narrative is for. Is a trans narrative in a game like ours for mainstream, general audiences to consume, feel something, and then move on from? Or is it primarily for trans people to see ourselves in, and to shape our own stories, worlds, and realities with? Or can a trans narrative do both?

Empathy has thus been a constant part of our team's discussions and design process, though not as one might expect. Instead of designing for empathy, with empathy as a goal, our team talks regularly about the dangers and limitations of empathy, and we often find ourselves designing around or even against it. For the *Trans Folks Walking* team, a critical approach to empathy means paying careful attention at all times to who we are designing for and including a diversity of trans narratives that demonstrate there is no universal Trans Story. *Trans Folks Walking* is an anthology of stories in game form that is always already limited and incomplete—it will never represent the entirety of what it means to be trans because that is impossible. The game is also first and foremost by and for trans people, and we design it for a primary audience of trans people seeking other trans stories and experiences. We are largely apathetic about whether or not the game connects with non-trans audiences. We are not opposed to non-trans people playing the game and hopefully learning or growing through their experience with it. Yet that isn't our primary concern either. This is despite the fact that the game was initially funded with a grant through the Empathic Games Initiative at Michigan State University. Even though our team has very ambivalent feelings and critical positions regarding empathy, it is telling that this project only got started with initial funding by being

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willing to engage with that approach. Trans games, including ours, remain limited by popular, dominant expectations of empathy, but we have sought to reroute that expectation and the money that goes with it toward a game primarily for trans communities.

Putting trans communities at the center of *Trans Folks Walking* has meant involving community partners at every stage of the design process as active, agential collaborators and co-designers. Instead of creating fictional accounts of hypothetical or abstracted trans people, we wanted trans community members we interviewed to have control over their stories during and after the design process, so that they would be directly involved in what those stories looked like in game form. In practice, this means our process takes longer and follows some key steps. First, through community partners like LGBTQ resources centers, institutions, or local events we invite community members to participate in interviews and storytelling sessions with members of the design team. Based on their interests and capacity, we then invite them to work with team members to design what their story might look like in game form, including activities like level design, scripting and voice line recording, and adding quotes, images, and other assets to the level. Finally, we work with them to polish the level into a playable narrative experience that they retain control over—if ever someone wants their level changed or removed from the collection, our team works with them to find a solution. While this design process is ongoing and the game has not officially released as of this writing, the results have already been energizing and transformative for folks involved. Rather than harvesting stories from trans communities and using them to our own ends, the project has instead become one of building relationships, sharing knowledge reciprocally, and creating collectively.

One of the best and most life-giving examples of this, both for the project generally and for me personally, has been a collaboration with a trans elder in Buffalo named Cheryl. Cheryl is currently in her 80s, has been a resident of Buffalo, NY for decades, and is a leader in a local progressive, LGBTQ-affirming Christian church. I first met Cheryl at a community event at a small, family-owned Irish restaurant and bar, and quickly learned she has a penchant for telling stories (so much so that she is often given explicit, friendly reminders of time limits for speaking at community events). Despite this, when I first asked Cheryl if she would be interested in sharing her story for *Trans Folks Walking*, her response was one I have heard all too often in community and oral history projects: "Why would you want to interview me?" This response sticks with me not just because it is a common one, but because I think it reveals a lot about the deep need for different stories and the limitations inherent in common assumptions about the tellability of stories (which stories we think are worth telling). We are conditioned by our histories and popular narratives to think our stories do not matter unless we have done something great and famous. Even with decades of experiences, stories, and knowledge to share, Cheryl did not initially feel like her stories were worth sharing, and in that feeling I sense the misrecognition of age that Lorde identified at work.

In the process of working with Cheryl, I have heard dozens of stories about topics ranging from her childhood and summers in Michigan to her adult career in music to community organizing to mentoring LGBTQ groups in religion and spirituality. Some of these stories have become part of the second level of *Trans Folks Walking*, which tells the story of a trans woman returning to the church she grew up in and recalling how and why that space became less and less welcoming as she transitioned. Without going into detail about these stories and spoiling the game, there are a few lessons I have learned from Cheryl's stories that are useful for trans games, and for storytelling in media more generally. The first lesson is just to really listen. The everyday stories of trans peoples are filled with knowledges and strategies for how to navigate the world, and if we listen to

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Image 1: A screenshot of the church level in *Trans Folks Walking*, depicting a dimly lit, 3D cathedral interior with pews and columns. Spread throughout the area are blue chat bubbles that share text and audio narration when interacted with. Image provided and copyright held by Cody Mejeur.

each other we will encounter different ways of playing, being, and relating. Listening in this context actually starts with a lot of groundwork in creating caring and reciprocal relationships with people: showing up for them and their communities, making space for their perspectives and values, and ensuring that the project stays focused on what it can do with and for the community, rather than what it can do for the game's development team. All of this takes time, and it is all about listening as an ethic and a practice that motivates the entire process.

The second lesson proceeds from the first: by listening, we better recognize each other, bridging gaps without erasing differences and communicating the critical hope to each other that our stories *do* matter. You do not have to be at the center of a radical national or international movement for your story to mean something, and small and ordinary stories are powerful too. The everyday stories of regular people living their lives, including using the bathroom, navigating institutions, or meeting up at a bar or a community center can be the most meaningful ones in that people can more regularly see themselves in such stories. In each of the playtesting, showcase, and workshop events we have held with *Trans Folks Walking*, we have encountered trans players and community members who find parts of their own stories in the game. While it is hard to prove exactly why this keeps happening, I do not think it is because our game has hit on any magic formula or revolutionary insight for game design. Rather, I think what stands out about our game is paradoxically how ordinary it is, how easy it is for players to inhabit and play with these stories because they are drawn from everyday experiences. The vast majority of people, trans and non-trans, use the bathroom, go to work or school, and have relationships with other people, and while the feelings around these activities are particular

Image 2: A picture of playtesting conducted at the Meaning Play 2022 game showcase at Michigan State University. Two computers with the game demo sit on top of a table with a white tablecloth, and flyers for the game are folded and placed on the table. A player's hands hold a controller they are using to play the game. Image provided and copyright held by Cody Mejeur.

to trans people in *Trans Folks Walking*, the universality of them makes the game more approachable and recognizable for many players. This allows people to relate to the game in some way, see their similarities and differences to others, and hopefully also understand how these common stories are still meaningful ones.

The last lesson, which is particularly helpful for our small trans community game team, is to do what you can, with what you have, where you are. Unfortunately community organizing and indie game development are often woefully under-resourced, especially for marginalized peoples and

their communities, but you can still do good, meaningful, community-building work with what you have and the free, open source tools you can find online. For our game development team, this has involved using software like Blender for creating art assets, Audacity for sound recording and editing, and Unity for our game engine. Each of these tools still has limitations, such as the technology and skill required to access them (or the limits of a free license with Unity), but by sharing stories and resources, problem solving together, and creating collectively, trans communities can create our own games and media for ourselves, without having to wait for a mainstream studio to see us as a profitable audience.

My critical hope for trans games and trans game studies is that they will tell and play the many different, everyday, little stories of trans peoples, especially the ones that do not fit common expectations of what it means to be trans. I want to see and make trans games that will continue to build local and regional community relationships, especially in places and with peoples that don't get as much attention in popular media narratives. In this sense, trans games can play a crucial role in designing and playing counter-narratives to dominant assumptions and stereotypes about trans people. This means being willing to take the uncertain and even scary step of surrendering creative control over a game and opening that up to community partners that will likely take that game in unexpected directions. It also means that one does not fully own the game even as they craft it, and this form of community-based game development does not fit well within established industry standards for intellectual property, revenue, etc. But I've already seen how this process can be thoroughly trans and transformative. Trans games can help us better understand ourselves as different trans peoples, with different relationships to our identities, bodies, and communities. They can also help bridge generational divides that rob us of knowledge and connection and keep us reinventing the same wheels. Finally, the play involved in making and playing trans games can

break apart The Trans Story into stories that better reflect and recognize our differences, generating new ways of relating, playing, and supporting each other in the process.

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